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Critical Digital Studies

26 April, 2019

Weird Internet Aesthetics: *Are Lo-Fi Media Inherently Revolutionary?*

“Two concepts of culture, art, science, and cinema compete: *that of the rulers and that of the nation*” (267).

-Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanos

Towards A Third Cinema (1971)

Abstract

This essay explores participatory media as a form of “imperfect cinema”. Particularly, I’m focusing on Instagram as a platform in which users both produce and consume material in a way which embodies Juan García Espinosa’s notion of how “imperfect cinema” functions. To begin, I will attempt to tease the greater context of this paper, that being the production and consumption of digital content in the twenty-first century and how the modes of how content is produced emphasizes or complicates an ancient tension between the individual and corporation, proletariat and bourgeoisie, and the casual and profitable. I’ll observe the framework of Instagram more broadly, its ability to draw overlap between the individual and corporation, and the curious phenomena of lo-fi aesthetics. From here, I will propose a particular reading for this phenomenon; that lo-fi aesthetics branch from an intrinsic desire to oppose capitalism. Next, I will introduce the framework of imperfect cinema, its qualities, and how these qualities are illuminated in Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanos’ 1968 Latin-American

film *Hour of the Furnaces*. With the framework of Hito Steyerl implemented in her work, “In Defense of The Poor Image,” as well as Juan García Espinosa’s Third Cinema manifesto, *For an Imperfect Cinema*, I will draw connections between the mode of “Imperfect Cinema” and low quality digital aesthetics. With this understanding, I will use this framework to discuss a renaissance of lo-fi imagery, and weird internet aesthetics. Essentially, in understanding that lo-fi aesthetic functions similarly to “imperfect cinema,” in combination with the framework discussed by Espinosa, Gettino and Solonas, and Steyerl’s modernized conception, we can understand how and why lo-fi aesthetics arise, why they are “work” to either be funny or impactful, and what they inevitably end up doing to comment or critique modes of control over the common individual.

Weird Instagram Aesthetics: An Introduction

Over the past several years, Instagram has grown beyond a social media platform, and as a whole has developed itself as a medium in which a diverse background of users, with voices both large and small operate in the same field of production and consumption. While a corporation, such as Sony or Columbia Records, may have the utilities of outreach that an independent content producer may not have, by the restrictive interface that Instagram offers its users, the platform presents an inherent equality among what users engage and interact with, or at least this is how it appears phenomenologically to the causal browser. While operating from within the same interface, questions of equality arise when we consider the professionalism and quality of media posted, as well as labor spent in popularizing the content posted. For instance, let us consider a photo of Fender brand guitar that I post on my personal account, versus a photo of Jack White’s

Fender brand guitar posted by Columbia Records account. While both may showcase similar content, in seemingly similar frameworks, they vary in the level of recognition and engagement the post will receive, as well as the kind of recognition and engagement. In the same vein, a picture of an independent social user taken of themselves using the front camera feature on their iPhone camera and posted on their personal account is inherently unequal to a professionally shot photo of a user taken on an expensive camera and posted by a corporation, despite operating from within the same user interface. While seemingly the same, the quality of posts and inevitable outreach within the account, (i.e. followers, sponsored material, and popularity) do an immense amount of work in contributing to the overall engagement of the content.

It's here that one might consider this juxtaposition between corporation and individual, and bourgeoisie and proletariat, as a tension that points toward ancient motivations for production and consumption. We begin to observe a phenomenon that will be introduced later in this paper; a modern version of, "two concepts of culture, art, science...that of the rulers and that of the nation" (267, Getino and Solonas). For a moment, let us consider this tension resonating between lo-fi and hi-fi media in the current technological climate. Both technology, and our access to it has grown at an exponential rate since personal computers were introduced in the mid 70's. In our current climate, it is estimated that nearly 2.5 billion individuals own, or have access to smartphones (Statistica, 2019), let alone personal computers. As a collective we are bombarded with the newest models, updates, upgrades, and trends. The standard of consumer quality grows higher, as higher resolutions, faster speeds, become more readily available for the public. The camera quality from one's 2008 Apple iPhone 3G is

incomparable to 2017's iPhone X. The quality of one's LinkedIn profile photo taken on your nice camera from five years ago doesn't compete with the newest stills captured by this year's newest model. In fact, it becomes *unacceptable*. In a framework where it's becoming only easier to create and consume higher resolution images, why would anyone bother to engage with anything less?

Yet, lo-fi aesthetics still flood the internet. To define these aesthetics is a hard task, however, it's unavoidable that anyone who's technologically active has engaged with material of this sort. The term "lo-fi" comes from the term lo-fidelity, or the opposite of high-fidelity. Essentially, lo-fi celebrates imperfections and can be deemed as low quality in relation to contemporary standards. This can come in a variety of different forms. For instance, a loud rock band recorded on a cheap microphone might produce a recording characterized by distortion, a lack of clarity, resulting in an overall sloppy or messy quality, all of which could be considered lo-fi. Posting this track next to the newest releases of artists like Ed Sheeran, or producer Mark Ronson, places it in opposition to the ultra clear and "professional" production, emphasizing its qualities as an aesthetic. Similarly, an image could be considered lo-fi by some of the same characteristics. Taking a photo on a flip phone camera for instance may produce an overly pixelated, low resolution image. Additionally, photos taken on a film camera or polaroid may result in an oversaturated, grainy, blurry photograph. In both instances, the results are something other than a mere reproduction of the phenomena attempted to be captured, but rather an interpretation of that phenomena through the lens of the imperfections of the medium. Often times these blemishes evoke a certain nostalgic quality for certain individuals. The hiss and two-dimensional quality of a cassette evoke a feeling of familiarity for those that

grew up in the 1980's and 90's, while the over compressed tinny sound of a copied mp3 may evoke that same feeling for those that came of age in the mid 2000's. The aesthetics of lo-fi images however seep into our casual browsing and consumption in more ways than simply as nostalgia. Lo-fi imagery, more than any of its characteristics evoke a sense of irony, and sarcasm, particularly through notions of the grotesque. To understand this however, we first must understand how hi-fi imagery operates in comparison.

The “Hi-Fi”

In 2019, one of the more popular mediums of sharing personal content and information online comes through the framework of social media. Of the abundance of mainstream platforms that allow users to share images, Instagram emphasizes this notion as its key feature. Since its launch in October of 2010, its base of users has grown far beyond individuals using the app for the purpose of sharing photos with their friends, but developed into a mass market of corporations, businesses, artists, politicians, and influencers, all of which use the app to gain popularity in their respective goals. They do however, have at least one notion in common: *performance*. In each sense, the quality of posts reflects the quality of the entity behind it. In an effort to stay relevant, these respective entities must work to keep the quality of their images to the standards of the current social and political climate.

Essentially, this performance breaks down into two categories, content and quality. As a free social platform, Instagram funds itself based entirely between user's engagement with the app. The only theoretical function an image on Instagram has is to be shared and “liked”. In this sense, posts operate similar to advertisements and attempt to evoke a sense of engagement with the “consumer,” or users of the app. For some, this

desire for engagement may result in the production of an evocative photo of a beautiful landscape, a dream vacation, or in general having a desirable time. This requires a partial or filtered vision of the reality it attempts to portray. Simply put, these posts attempt to communicate the ideal. Just as car companies don't share content showcasing their dysfunctional cars, or customers unhappy with their services, Instagram users don't post pictures of themselves crying or having a bad time. Or at least according to the proposed framework of attempting to be "liked", *they shouldn't*. The ideals of "hi-fi" are extraordinarily progressive in this way. A big part of this comes down to the quality of the images themselves. The resolution, the clarity, and the ability to stay up with the ever-changing demands of exponential advancement of technology. If content isn't presented in the latest industry standard, it is easily scrolled past or looked over. In all this requires both conscious effort in posting material with thoughtful attention to detail, as well being complicit in the modes of everchanging production, i.e. purchasing the newest equipment in order to produce content to the standards of the industry.

On the contrary, images presented without editing, blurry, stolen, put without care hold lo-fi aesthetics. They go against the ideals of these technological progressions, and in contrast embody a notion of the grotesque. They attempt to avoid interaction, or to be validated. For instance, let's take the promotional material produced by independent musicians for their work via social media. While these users still operate through their respective record labels and corporate based facilitation, their personal platforms such as YouTube and Instagram continue to allow for a more direct interaction with their respective fans. As opposed to her professionally designed tour poster and resources through High Road Touring, Caroline Rose opts to tease her upcoming dates with a

progressively zoomed in picture of the acne on her face, in contrast with a stolen picture of the earth and moon (the watermark of the picture is still prominent) in the same position of her acne related to one another. Here, Rose contrasts professionalism with purposefully amateurish self-made media. Similarly, indie slacker rock star, Mac Demarco shares a zoomed grainy photo of himself and his girlfriend, with a purposeful double chin and foolish expression. Similarly, he shares a close-up photo of himself, clearly taken by a camera zoomed in from a distance away. Demarco looks blankly at the camera from behind a pair of unfashionable sunglasses, framing his face in an uncomplimentary way. Both photos are characterized by their odd content, pixelated and grainy features, and seemingly undefined purpose, placing them in an odd context. Here Rose and Demarco point towards a strange phenomenon in self-made media that begs the question: what about the amateurish quality of production and self participatory media is *funny* and *impactful*? In what way do artists have the ability to engage with their fans in the same context their fans are able to engage with them liberating, and by making these interactions purposefully unprofessional, does this challenge some sort of understood notion of production?

Imperfect Cinema, and it's Lo-Fi Realization

One way, we can understand this phenomenon is through an intrinsic desire to oppose the dominant framework at play. Instagram phenomena works as imperfect cinema/media in a way that circumvents capitalism. For instance, the interface of Instagram allows for a particular participatory aspect of media production that lends itself to what theorist and philosopher Julia García Espinosa calls “imperfect cinema”. Imperfect Cinema, in its most basic sense, is a form of guerrilla filmmaking that

originated in the late 60's in which multiple authors, and contributors worked on documentary filmmaking, as opposed to one particular visionary. By incorporating the perspective and worldview from multiple persons, the overall work gets closer to defined vision of society or of human nature, and inevitably avoids having one speaker for society, which in turn circumvents the promotion of a capitalist society. Of its time, one could call Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanos' 1968 Latin-American film *Hour of the Furnaces* the epitome of this mode of filmmaking.

Rather than attempt to understand individual perspective or experience, *Furnaces* mode of filmmaking focuses on the notion of the collective in a way that showcases a clear juxtaposition between neo colonizers and common Argentinian life. The film attempts to capture the harsh conditions of the country's native inhabitants through a period in which the bourgeoisie held a dominant and oppressive power over the working class individual. In order to do this, the film focuses on juxtaposing a series of visual media captured from a multitude of Argentinian perspectives. For instance, one scene depicts a poverty-stricken wasteland while a series of dirty children wearing minimal clothing wallow in dirt. A voice over relays this section of the country as, "the breeding ground of malnutrition disease and hunger. In Argentina there are 900 thousand abandoned children. In the rural zones, of every 100 babies, 70 are illegitimate. Of every 10 babies born alive, 4 die" (Hour of Furnaces). Immediately, this depiction becomes juxtaposed with skyscrapers, celebratory citizens, and a series of wide shots showcasing the westernized city of Buenos Aires. The same voice now affirms "Buenos Aires [as the] nerve centre of neo colonial politics. White city in a half breed America. City built at the expense of the whole country...city of executives and professional people...the petty

bourgeoisie snivels over an upset world. For it the country is intolerable, but unchangeable. Change is necessary, but impossible” (Hour of Furnaces).

What’s to be said about this? In “Towards a Third Cinema,” Getino and Solonas articulate that “In the neocolonial situation two concepts of culture, art, science, and cinema compete: that of the rulers and that of the nation”(267). In order for one to expose the exploitative nature of the bourgeoisie, it is absolutely necessary to work outside the framework implemented by the bourgeoisie. To do this *Furnaces*, uses a series of footage from different sources, and relies on juxtaposition as its ultimate rhetoric. The scene noted above does little to nothing to dramatize its situation, but rather relies on experiences of the *everyday* accompanied by a list of straightforward factual information. In both its content, production, and consumption, *Furnaces* belongs abundantly to the people who made it, and avoids, “a separation between politics and art” (266, Gettino, Solonas).

As a latent result of this mode of reactionary cinema comes a distinct amateurish quality, that sets the bar for a distinct aesthetic quality for participatory media; one that resembles an anti-capitalist methodology and attitude. In this vein, there remains a particular connection between the essence of low quality media and a tendency for a sort of experience that remains of the people, and perhaps by the same vein a tendency towards revolution against the bourgeoisie. In, “Defense of The Poor Image,” German filmmaker, visual artist, and writer Hito Steyerl asserts, “The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution”(Steyerl). In case the double-entendre wasn’t apparent upon first glance, Steyerl points towards “fifth generation bastardizations of their original

images,” thrown into the digital abyss to repurposed and reused material, in which ownership becomes communal. To engage with a lo-fi image “mocks the promises of digital technology,” while simultaneously it is digital technology itself that makes the lo-fi image possible.

Steyerl draws a connection between the resurrection of poor quality images, and purposeful distortion resembled in “Imperfect Cinema”. She directly quotes Juan García Espinosa’s Third Cinema manifesto, *For an Imperfect Cinema*, stating:

“Espinosa argues for an imperfect cinema because, in his words, “perfect cinema—technically and artistically masterful—is almost always reactionary cinema.” The imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the divisions of labor within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic”(Steyerl).

This quote helps illuminate distinct connections between imperfect cinema, and the resurrection of low quality images. To begin, the low quality image is inherently a medium of the people. It requires no gated access, or special permission, but is ready available to the independent user through one’s access to the internet’s communal abyss. While perfect media is reactionary in the sense that is only consumed by the masses, imperfect media is participatory as it invites the collective to contribute. “Imperfect cinema” effectively combines the notions of politics and art in one place, in a way that liberates the individual. Similarly, to copy, edit, re-upload, distort, share, and consume

digital imagery is to take a direct hand in its online significance, in a way that reactionary imagery cannot. The, “high-resolution image looks more brilliant and impressive, more mimetic and magic, more scary and seductive than a poor one”(Steyerl), but it is the low quality image that shares a sort of “realness” with the common user. In the way that *House of The Furnaces* doesn’t attempt to awe it’s viewers with the spectacle of cinema’s potential, the low quality image doesn’t attempt to trick the viewer into believing that the image is indeed a manifestation of reality that the high resolution attempts to capture. In this sense, the low quality image seems almost more genuine, and insistent on it’s imperfection.

Anti-capitalist notions lie between imperfect cinema and lo-fi aesthetics on Instagram. Imperfect cinema as a medium worked outside the notion of the strongly capitalist bourgeoisie, by producing content through a series of non-professional individuals whom of which actively worked to produce honest and unbiased material. Films like *The Hour of The Furnaces* were made by non-filmmakers, and opted to distribute their material amongst the people of their country non-commercially, outside of cinemas. In this way, these films attempt to circumvent the performative nature of high budget commercial efforts and inevitable government censorship. These films showcased the grotesque nature of the country at its time. Similarly, lo-fi aesthetics on Instagram attempt to circumvent the filtered and performative hi-fi aesthetic by highlighting aspects of content unedited and grotesque. They purposefully suffer from a lack of professionalism, and are characterized by intentionally low quality material against the standards of the current advancements of technology.

I want to be clear here that I am not referring to images posted by the average consumer. Most consumers fall into the framework of posting material that attempts to highlight notions of the ideal. Rather, I'm attempting to refer to terribly honest and grotesque photos. Photos of unfiltered human presence. Unedited and unflattering photos of users. Stolen mages, bastardized six times from their original source. Photos capturing the human in its most unflattering state. Overall things that beg, "*i don't give a fuck if someone sees this.*" As a concept, they work against the notion of the ideal, compromising productivity of the app by encouraging users to not "like," or share the photo. Theoretically, by attempting to stop engagement, this kind of content actively attempts to keep Instagram from profiting from it's users. As we'll see however, this sort of parallel reading to imperfect cinema doesn't *exactly* fit in our modern socio-political context. Particularly, whereas imperfect cinema attempts to highlight the grotesque in an attempt to promote serious change, lo-fi aesthetics arise ironically. While they highlight an unedited notion of the grotesque that plays against the cliché notion of Instagram performance, these aesthetics are still entirely performative in nature. Before we can understand these discrepancies however, we must first take a closer look at how these posts *do* work to parallel imperfect cinema and anti-capitalist notions.

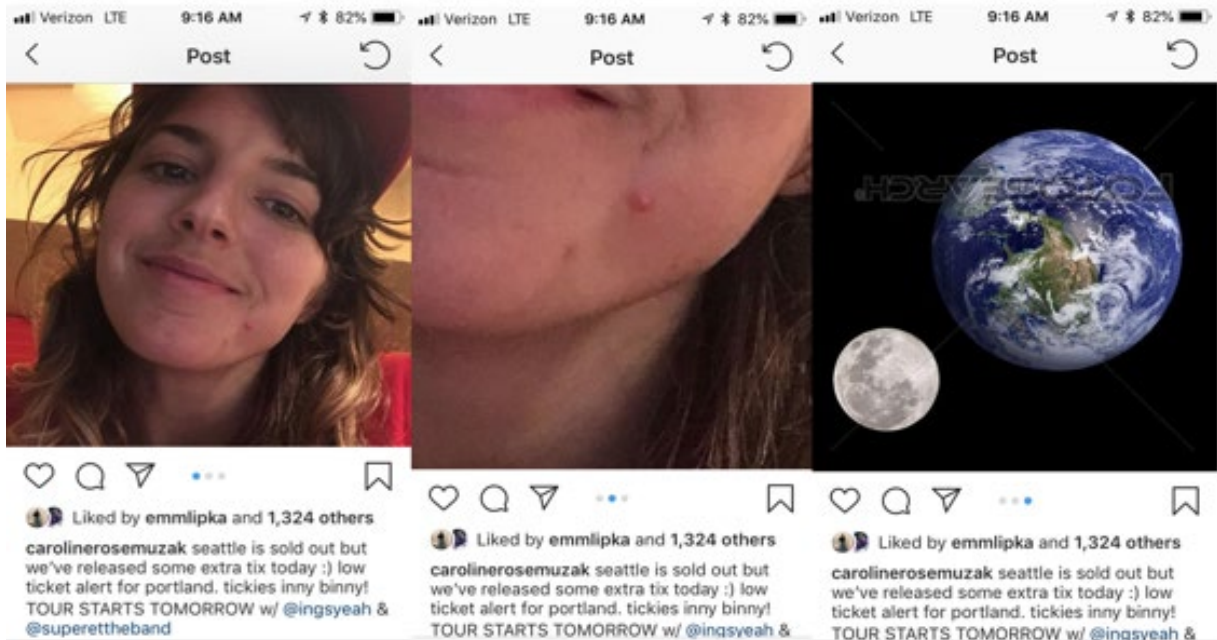
Instagram As Imperfect Cinema

As a platform, Instagram serves extraordinary potential for a form of content creation and consumption in a way that gives a particular control to the masses, both in a creative means, and in determining it's ultimate significance. Participatory media, in that it is produced and shared by a series of individual users, creates a new network of communication and documentation in which, according to Steyerl, Espinosa predicted.

She states, “Like the economy of poor images, imperfect cinema diminishes the distinctions between author and audience and merges life and art. Most of all, its visuality is resolutely compromised: blurred, amateurish, and full of artifacts”(Steyerl). The lo-fi aesthetic is one that intentionally opts out of high resolution, as if “Resolution was fetishized as if its lack amounted to castration of the author”. In the world of digital production and sharing through the iPhone alone, we screenshot and edit, zoom and distort, download and repost, all in ways that leave little consideration for an intended author. With instant access to high quality editing programs and services, as well as an abundance of content production programs, just through our phone alone, there’s something really quite *lazy*, and perhaps *absurdist* about opting to make one’s media intentionally low quality.

Let’s consider Instagram as less of a social platform, and more for what it really is: a business. While users were never hired by Instagram per se, they are the individuals who make the business function properly. Without us, there is no engagement with the content produced, and without engagement there is no basis for the app. In the same sense this notion of engagement correlates with the notion of productivity. The more users engage, the more successful the app is. When there's a sense of that the user is not being productive, either by choosing not to engage, or by producing content that actively works against the ideals of the company itself by producing content that doesn’t attempt to do everything it can to have other users engage with it, than essentially the user of this content actively takes away from the profitable gain of the company, and thus exploiting the system itself.

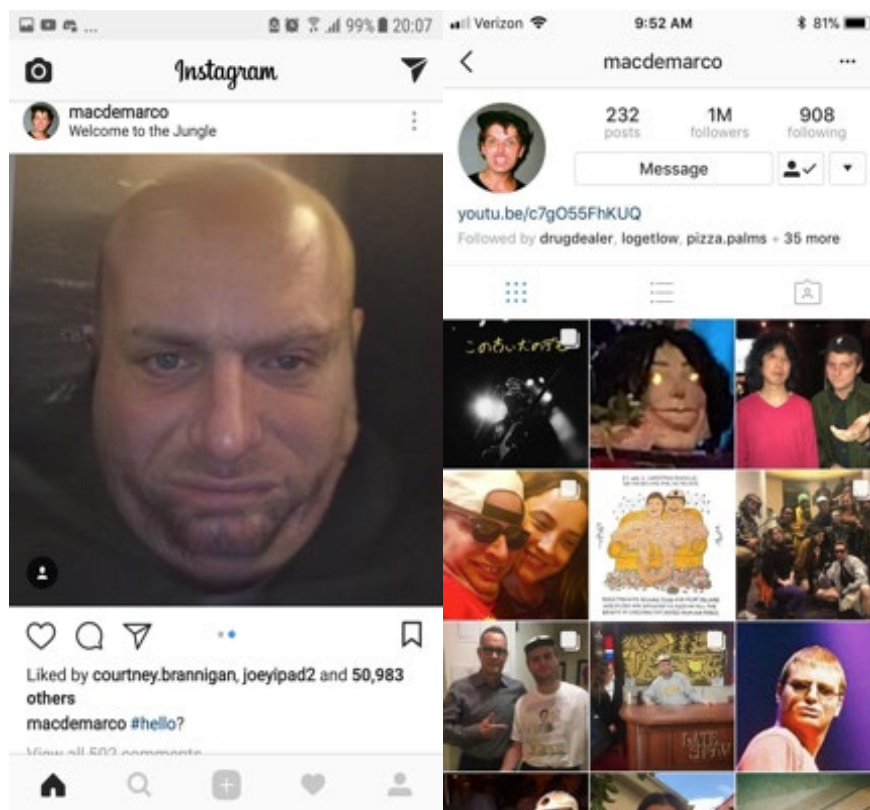
In a theoretical sense, to actively circumvent very bare amount of effort to make one's produced content fit within the framework of the "ideal", either through content itself or its actual technical quality, this user adapts in a sense a quite anti capitalist notion of production on Instagram. Let's look back towards Caroline Rose's Instagram post mentioned earlier in this paper. The picture of the earth and moon has clearly been taken, or stolen from another source. Rather than producing a higher quality photo of the earth and moon, the effect of the watermark on the low-resolution photo relays this laziness, or an intended performance of laziness in the appropriation of the photograph. The process seems quick, as if almost reactionary to the speed in which one can access and reuse content from one's mobile device in an instant without a formal consideration, or thought. It's as if this notion of "slacking" contributes to Rose's own personal brand, that of which Rolling Stone Magazine would describe as "a sharp eyed satirist" in their summer 2018 piece, "Caroline Rose Is Making Fun of Everything"(Rolling Stone). In posts such as this one, it seems Rose does work to rebel against the professionalism of corporate branding through the use of shared imagery, and low quality at that. It also seems however, that this rebellion only seems to reaffirm her brand, that in turn is used to build capital. The caption is purely informative, relaying that fans have limited time to purchase tickets to her show in Portland, and other information regarding the rest of her tour to promote her album "Loner," of whose album art depicts Rose smoking an entire pack of cigarettes at once.



Posts by carolinerosemuzak, Instagram, 21 February 2019

I think to call this a conscious choice on the part of Rose seems at least to me unlikely, and more plausible to consider this post as something that she might have thought was funny, or something her audience might enjoy. It is worth considering however, *where* the origins of this aesthetic originate from, *why* it's funny, and what the *particular* effect it has is. Hito Steyerl argues that the real and contemporary imperfect cinema to be “much more ambivalent and affective” than Espinosa may have anticipated. While on one hand poor images have the immediate possibility of being redistributed among a worldwide audience, not all of these opportunities are progressive. She states, “While the territory of poor images allows access to excluded imagery, it is also permeated by the most advanced commodification techniques. While it enables the users’ active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production”(Steyerl). In the case of Rose, it is the very image that works to separate herself from the consistencies of professional branding that in turn helps her to build

capital and contribute to her financial success. It would seem that this post, with its amateurish quality resonates with a desire to defy capitalism through guerilla marketing tactics, but in turn falls short of fulfilling this if we consider it as in fact an intrinsic desire. That being said, it seems to be a logical fallacy that individual embedded in the capitalist system could actually defy the system with low quality imagery (that is, using defiant media to accomplish the thing that the media is defiant against).



Mac Demarco's instagram page before it was deleted in January 2019

Most clearly, these images are meant to be humorous. There's an inherent value in not taking the medium of promotion seriously, or at least in a way that clearly works against it's ideal vision. Let's consider Mac Demarco's Instagram. As a prominent figure in the independent scene, "often deemed a prince of indie rock," Mac Demarco's

Instagram presence couldn't be any less focused on attempting to sell records. In one post we see a close up photo of himself, clearly taken by a camera zoomed in from a distance away. Demarco looks blankly at the camera from behind a pair of unfashionable sunglasses, framing his face in an uncomplimentary way. There's no caption to this post whatsoever, placing it in a rather odd context. It doesn't entirely make allusions or reference to anything particular, and doesn't clearly have a point. And that seems *entirely* the point. Furthermore, Demarco posts a photo of himself looking unamused at his forward facing cell phone camera. Taking the photo from his torso, the perspective looks up towards Demarco's illuminated double chin. The photo has been altered to portray Demarco as having no hair, emphasizing the qualities of his appearance to appear particularly aged and unflattering (macdemarco, #hello) For someone deemed as royalty in his particular scene, desirable and likeable, this post portrays Demarco as exactly the opposite. In a basic sense, it seems strange to resonate with such as an aesthetic. The caption reads, "#hello?" further placing this already seemingly random image out of context. The hashtag feature is designed to allow users to link towards other similar content on the platform, however, here the hashtag references nothing in the image, and furthermore remains vague enough to relate to a plethora of imagery so broad that there is no emphasized connection. Again the point of this type of post, seems to be that there is *no point*. Theoretically this notion of posting remains counterproductive when we consider the framework as Instagram as a business trying to get it's users to engage with their content. But the fact is, both Demarco and Rose, despite using lo-fi aesthetics still stimulate a large amount of traffic and engagement with both of their pages. Furthermore, this engagement doesn't attempt to reconsider the implications of capitalism by

emphasizes the grotesque, but rather do something performative in the form of sarcasm and humor. This is particularly where the sort of parallel reading to imperfect cinema doesn't *exactly* fit in our modern socio-political context.

Discrepancy regarding historical sociological contexts between Imperfect Cinema and Instagram

The motivations and logistics behind the original imperfect cinema are radically different than that of the contemporary digital contexts. Whereas the lo-fi aesthetics of original imperfect cinema came from the lack of access to professional grade equipment for necessary revolution against the state, the modern implications of digital imperfections aren't nearly that radical. Imperfect cinema attempts to highlight the grotesque in an attempt to promote serious change, lo-fi aesthetics arise ironically. While they emphasize an unedited notion of the grotesque that plays against the cliché notion of Instagram performance, these aesthetics are still entirely performative in nature. Both Demarco and Rose capitalize on their "lo-fi" aesthetic by performing humor, a form of the "ideal" or desirable post in a different way. Rather than be attempting to evoke a sense of engagement through embodying the ideals of ever-progressing technology and the put together, and the somewhat "professional" aspects of advertisement, these users engage their audience through irony and sarcasm. It's an aesthetic that disguises itself as poking fun at the serious implications of the Instagram framework of taking oneself seriously, and simultaneously embodies them. The bourgeoisie in the context of the original imperfect cinema would refuse to stoop to the proletariat level of production and distribution, whereas the modern corporation will do everything it can to capitalize on these modes of independent production. The effect of this makes imperfection in its

modern context far less revolutionary than the context it originated from. That being understood, the mode of participatory media still has the capacity to elicit change among understanding and trends when posted with certain intention.

Revolution Through Posting

We can see here that both Instagram and imperfect cinema root themselves in participatory modes that allow for a societal commentary and critique. Espinosa states, “It is possible that art gives us a vision of society of human nature and that, at the same time, it cannot be defined as a vision of society or of human nature” (288, Espinosa). Rather than allowing the vision of human nature residing in an artistic elite, with the mode of filmmaking that imperfect cinema offers, this vision of human nature comes across as more representative and accurate of the masses vision of the world. In *Marxism and Film Activism: Screening Alternative Worlds*, Bruce Williams discusses, “The initial showings of *The Hour of the Furnaces* in union halls, schools, and universities, constituted ‘an attempt to render a tabula rasa the taboos of production and distribution of the cinema industry’... It posits that the international acclaim the work received in Pesaro provided it with a sort of ‘protection; at a time when Argentina had the least degree of freedom of expression” (Williams). In producing a mode of cinema that relies not on one perspective or individual artists, but rather opting for input and footage from an broad spectrum of individual non artists, a more holistic and accurate vision of society comes across in the film. In its screenings, *The House of The Furnaces* was able to accurately circumvent the bourgeoisie’s monopolization of the cinema industry, and lend a voice to oppressed common people of Argentina. Espinosa quotes Marx stating, “In the future there will no longer be painters, but rather men who, among other things dedicate themselves to

painting”(290). In this moment, the masses are liberated with creative control in a way that wasn’t there before. Similarly, in today’s creative network, social media platforms such as Instagram allow for communities of the people to circumvent latent notions and trends that may not have been noticed otherwise. This inevitably allows for a greater understanding of these trends, as well as an opportunity to critique and modify.

Demarco and Rose emphasize a mode of the lo-fi aesthetic that embrace anti-capitalist notions in the regard that they emphasize aspects of the grotesque and actively choose to go against the major notions of the Instagram ideal, but fall short in producing anything revolutionary. On the other hand, Instagram account `beam_me_up_softboi` produces lo-fi aesthetics, with not only humor, but the power to promote a sense of revolution. The account allows the user posts a series of screenshots of text-based conversations sent by followers of the account. The “soft boi,” a term generated to describe overly sensitive males who attempt to attract women by appealing to their emotions and showing a sensitive side long enough to have sex with them, isn’t necessarily a new phenomena, however, it’s through participatory media that we have the opportunity to critique, or draw attention to the type of behavior that could go unnoticed otherwise. For instance, in posting a screenshot of a conversation between two people in which one party (presumably a man) asks another party (presumably a woman) to spend time with him with overly romantic language, the ridiculous nature of said language becomes revealed outside of its intended context (`beam_me_up_softboi`, I first saw you yesteryear). The image is one re-appropriated from its original context; a text message exchange inherently private by nature of the communication, captured using the screenshot feature of the receiver's mobile device, cropped and edited, and then re-

uploaded to the public realm. It's unlikely that this post is attempting to do anything truly revolutionary, and is more likely drawn out for comedic effect. But it is worth considering, there is something inherently compelling about exploiting an individual who attempts to exploit partners in some sort of self-interest, whether that interest is stereotypically sexual or not. In placing the conversation outside of its original context, the pure absurdity of the conversation comes to fruition, in a way that's laughable as it's re experienced in a new context.

There's something to be said here about re-experience, both in content and aesthetics that embodies notions of "imperfect cinema". Let's start with the content itself. For followers of beam_me_up_softboi the experience of engaging with the soft-boi experience is one communally shared, but in the private context at the individual level. To share this experience into the public communal space forms a collective set of values and humor that works to defy the softboi in ways that wouldn't have arose in the private context. In engaging in private messaging, there isn't a community of individuals there to comment or critique actions. In the communal space however, there lies a *powerful* affirmation and opinion (as we will see shortly). On the side of aesthetics, as an operator of a mobile device, one has the ability to screenshot and share this media. The images we see on our screen, particularly those of the default iPhone messenger app are abundantly familiar and embedded into the everyday of its owner. Next to perhaps one's bathroom mirror or bed, it is an external object that has become integrated into our daily routine without fail. Like how *The Hour Of The Furnaces* chooses to focus on fairly straightforward imagery of oppression in juxtaposition with the bourgeoisie, focusing on the screenshot in juxtaposition with a series of other similar screenshot of experienced

conversations, emphasize a communal understanding that may have gone unnoticed otherwise. While humorous on their own, in context to one another these images begin to form a collective account on the “soft-boi,” their tendencies, and a mockery at that. The power of this behavior can surely be reflected in the note posted on the same account.

“i have been posting less on this account, and I am beginning to wonder whether the laughs we get from softbois are worth the potential harm towards men's mental health, something so fucking important which could potentially only worsen the bigger this account gets. i don't want to be responsible for a page that causes men to worry about whether being “soft” is a bad thing, even if the page is funny as fuck; - ...i would love to open up a discussion about how this page could continue in a less potentially harmful way” (beam_me_up_softboi, a letter to my dankest brethrens ie my followers)?

It's clear here of an awareness that this mode of participatory media has an astonishing effect on it's community of followers, and it's potential to influence and critique phenomena. This is the ambivalence Steyerl points to in the resurrection of imperfect media. This post presents a much more nuanced take on how revolutionary media doesn't always have the most progressive effects. In digital culture, imperfect media is simultaneously more accessible and easier to produce and circulate, but in the same way much harder to control and regulate. Whereas, cinema retains a sort of control under which production can cease, and circulation regulated (to a degree), participatory media reigns completely unhinged, making implications that weren't necessarily intended. The

posted media of beam_me_up_softboi can be interpreted under different conditions, and whose connotations change in relation to each consumer's personal experience. The tone of this note seems hesitant, as if to suggest the account in which was created belongs no more to themselves but rather the collective who submit to it. She voices an opinion unconfidently, and rather than take authoritative action with the account's direction, decide to leave the future of the account in the hands of their followers. While beam_me_up_softboi attempts not to promote anything revolutionary, and rather produces content in an attempt to poke fun at the norms of digital conversation, its lo-fi re-appropriation of imagery and collection of voices from non-professional content produces a phenomena that embodies that of imperfect cinema. While theoretically, it invites engagement in a more conscious way than other lo-fi imagery may allow for, its encompassing effect remains closer to the original intentions of imperfect cinema itself.

Closing Statements

Lo-fi aesthetics share an aspect of "imperfect cinema" in both aesthetics and consumption. In combination with the framework discussed by Espinosa, Gettino and Solonas, and Steyerl's modernized conception, one can understand how lo-fi aesthetics arise, why they are "work" to either be funny or impactful, and what they inevitably end up doing to comment or critique modes of control over the common individual. As we've seen Demarco and Rose emphasize a mode of the lo-fi aesthetic that embrace anti-capitalist notions in the regard that they emphasize aspects of the grotesque and actively choose to go against the major notions of the Instagram ideal, but fall short in producing anything revolutionary. On the other hand, Instagram account beam_me_up_softboi produces lo-fi aesthetics, with not only humor, but the power to promote a sense of

revolution. While imperfect cinema and lo-fi aesthetics don't have a direct correlation with one another, placing them into conversation with one another help us understand the ways in which lo-fi aesthetics acts as a byproduct of the ever advancing technological trend. As with any other digital mode of production, lo-fi aesthetics will only last as long as they are impactful. While the scope of this paper doesn't entirely get into why lo-fi aesthetics are exactly "funny" per se, it's clear that these modes of satire will only stay as relevant as the material they attempt to poke fun at. At some point in the distant future, Instagram as a mode of production will become obsolete. What we consider to be "Hi-fi," both in technical quality and the ideals it upholds will someday become the new lo-fi, just as the iPhone once succeeded the flip phone. The tension between proletariat and bourgeoisie, and corporation and individual however, seems unlikely to ever change. Lo-fi aesthetics, while in some regard only begin to tap into potential ways to critique this system, they offer a break in a monotonous advancement of a an oppressive power, and at least attempt to give a certain power to the individual. In studying these trends, further thinking can begin about how one can harness these aesthetics for revolution and change against these age-old tensions.

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